

Chapter One



He was late, not that Loretta minded. The fact he agreed to see her tonight already made her grateful. Sigurado siyang kulang ang bente-cuatro oras sa mga lalaking kagaya ni Nikolai sa dami ng ginagawa nito.

Wala sa sariling hinaplos niya ang diamante sa kanyang singsing. The stones felt cold and hard against her fingers. Strong, beautiful, elegant—kagaya ng pamilyang pinanggalingan niyon. Kagaya ng lalaking nagbigay sa kanya niyon.

Bumuga siya ng hangin at idinikit ang bibig ng champagne flute sa kanyang mga labi. Pero napatigil at napaismid si Loretta nang maamoy ang matamis na bango ng bulaklak at ang mas matapang na amoy ng citrus.

Jasmine, she concluded. The champagne smelled like fresh jasmine and orange peel. It had the subtle scent of berries, too. Akala ng iba ay pepper iyon, pero nagkamali sila. Pink peppercorn was not a pepper at all. Gawa ito sa berries ng *Schinus Molle*, habang ang white, green at black pepper ay galing sa iisang vine—*Piper Nigrum*.

Pumailanlang ang malakas na tawa ng isang babae sa bulwagan, at nagtaas ng tingin si Loretta.

The woman looked like a Christmas tree. Matingkad ang pulang buhok nito sa ilalim ng ginintuang liwanag ng chandelier. Kumikinang ang pink sequins sa hapit na gown nito at puno rin ito ng alahas. Diamonds, pearls and rubies dripped from the woman's ears, neck and

arms. From the way the woman sparkled with jewels, astronauts could probably see her from the outer space. Muli itong tumawa at lumagaslas na parang pulang seda ang mahaba nitong buhok sa likuran nito. Mukhang nahawa sa mood ng babae ang mga lalaki sa paligid nito, at tumawa rin ang mga ito.

“She is so garish,” usal ng isang babae sa tabi ni Loretta.

Napatingin siya rito, at nakita ang nakaismid na mukha ni Paloma Trinidad—ang isa sa mga anak ni Congressman Trinidad.

Tumawa siya sa babae. “I suppose.”

Binaling ni Paloma ang titig sa kanya. “How are you, Loretta?”

“Fine,” simple niyang sagot.

Well, she was fine, except for the fact she had to get married to someone she barely knew.

Marahang inalog ng kausap ang ginintuang likido sa flute nito, at bahagyang ibiniling ang ulo. Pinagmasdan niya ang babae at hindi napigilang mamangha sa pagtama ng ilaw sa buhok at maputing balat nito. It was the makeup, Loretta decided. And the color of Paloma’s dress. The soft cream and golden gown made the woman glow like a fairy. How did women do that? Loretta had no idea. Bigyan siya ng drain cleaner at rust remover at makakagawa siya ng nitroglycerin para sa isang improvised bomb. Pero bigyan siya ng gowns, sapatos, makeup, at alahas para ipagpare-pareha? Hah! Good luck sa kanila.

Pasimple niyang sinulyapan ang suot niyang black sheath gown na pinili ni Nanay Rosing. Plunging ang neckline nito at nilalantad ang malaking bahagi ng

kanyang dibdib. Not that there was much to reveal, anyway. She had small breasts, she even forgot she had them sometimes.

“I heard about your mother, and we’re glad she’s doing well now.”

Muli niyang itinaas ang tingin sa kausap at nakita ang maingat na titig nito sa kanya. Matabang siyang ngumiti. “Thank you, the doctors said it was nothing serious. She was just shocked, that’s all. And stressed. Kahit sino sigurong manakawan nang ilang daang milyon mai-stress. She’s okay.”

Tumango ang babae at sumimsim ng champagne.

Paloma was trying to be discreet and polite, she guessed. Iyon siguro ang dahilan kaya hindi na ito nagtanong pa tungkol sa sitwasyon ng pamilya niya ngayon. Pero hindi siya tanga. Maaaring hindi sanay si Loretta sa mga ganitong pagtitipon, pero alam niyang talamak na ang chismis tungkol sa pamilya nila. And there was nothing much they could really do about that.

“Oh,” usal ni Paloma.

Napakunot-noo siya at sinundan ang tinititigan nito.

At well, napa-‘oh’ din siya.

Because Nikolai Fernan Azcona Zamora was drool-inducing, female IQ-reducing piece of male specimen.

Darn, the guy could give David Gandy a run for his money. Kapag na-bankrupt ang *Azcona Zamora Corporation*, sigurado siyang yayaman ito bilang isang matagumpay na underwear at print ad model.

His dark hair looked bluish black in the soft lights, and his golden skin made him look like he just spent a week under the sun on a paradise beach. Na hindi totoo dahil alam niyang nasa Hokkaido ang binata nang

nakaraang mga araw dahil sa automotive business ng pamilya nito. Sabi ni Nikolai sa mga emails nito, he was mostly locked in boardrooms and conference room most of the day. But he didn't have that pale skin most CEO's have. He didn't have the aura that said he spent most of his days sitting behind a desk. He had a look of a...well...

Sinabi na nga niya kanina, an underwear model.

Umiling siya sa sarili.

Oh, Loretta, get your mind out of the gutter, will you?

Ibinalik niya ang titig kay Nikolai.

Tinanggal ng lalaki ang outer coat nito at ibinigay sa staff na naghihintay sa tabi nito. Pakiramdam niya ay tumaas nang ilang grado ang temperatura sa loob ng ballroom. His expensive suit couldn't tame his broad shoulders and strong arms. The material hugged his muscles, accentuating the powerful lines of his shoulders and broad chest. The subtle sheen of his coat and tie caught the light, and the black suit almost looked as black as his dark hair. *But not quite*, she thought to herself. There was nothing quite as black as Nikolai's hair.

Bigla, nakita niya ang sariling isinusuklay ang mga daliri sa makapal at maitim na maitim nitong buhok, pagkatapos ay hinihila ito pababa sa kanyang mukha para...

Nagtaas ang binata ng tingin at nagtama ang kanilang mga mata. Nanigas si Loretta at halos mabali niya ang stem ng champagne flute na hawak niya.

Naglakad ito palapit sa kanya.

"So it's true?" usal ni Paloma sa tabi niya. "Are you two really engaged?"

May talim sa tono ng babae, pero mahirap bigyang-pansin iyon habang nakatitig kay Nikolai. His eyes

looked like endless pools of darkness against his golden skin. A strong nose, a chiseled jaw, a sculpted mouth, the guy's face was a f*cking art piece. His coat and dress shirt strained across his wide shoulders and chest as he walked, and she was sure most of the women in the ballroom were imagining themselves tearing at his goddamn expensive suit. God, every step he took made her want to hyperventilate.

*Breathe, Loretta, f*cking breathe.*

Huminto ito sa tapat niya at inabot ang kanyang braso. Umarko ang init sa braso ng dalaga sa pagdampi ng balat nito sa kanya. May isang segundo siya para mamangha sa mahahabang pilikmata ng lalaki at maanggulong cheekbones nito bago ito tumungo para halikan siya sa pisngi.

Nanikip ang sikmura ni Loretta nang pumalibot sa kanya ang mainit na bango nito. Darn, the man oozed concentrated testosterone. And expensive perfume. He should start his own perfume line—Nikolai Azcona Zamora, guaranteed to melt your panties.

“I’m sorry I’m late.” His rough velvety voice slid across her skin like a caress. His warm breath gusted across her ear, and his soft lips touched her cheek.

Her toes curled inside her *Jimmy Choo*, and she was thankful she didn’t wear the four-inch heels that her mom had wanted her to wear. Baka gumewang na si Loretta at natumba sa lakas ng alpha male waves na inilalabas ng binata kung iyon ang suot niya.

Tumuwid si Nikolai ng tayo at pinilit niyang ngumiti. She just hoped she didn’t look like a constipated druggie.

“It’s okay, dinner’s not yet served, anyway.”

The corners of his mouth lifted, and she felt a

corresponding heat spreading across her abdomen.

*Oh, Loretta Therese Gamboa, get a f*cking grip!*

Gusto niyang kurutin ang sarili.

Inilapat nito ang isang palad sa kanyang likod, at nanuot ang init ng kamay ng binata sa manipis na tela ng kanyang gown. Muntik na siyang maduling sa sensasyong lumalangoy sa kanyang dugo.

“So you two are really engaged?” singit ni Paloma sa kanila ni Nikolai. Naroon pa rin ang talim sa tono nito, pero nanatiling subtle iyon.

“Yes,” pinal na sagot ng lalaki at itinaas ang kanyang kaliwang kamay.

Tumama ang ilaw sa mga diamante sa kanyang singsing, at kumislap ang mga iyon na parang ilang libong mga bituin.

“Loretta and I are getting married by June next year.”

Iginiya siya ni Nikolai sa table nila bago pa makasabat ulit ang babae.

Nice move, Dude, gusto niyang sabihin dito, pero parang nanunuyo ang lalamunan niya. She was keenly aware of Nikolai’s palm pressed against her lower back as he ushered her to their table. She just hoped she didn’t start sweating like a pig from the heat blooming across her skin because of his close proximity.

Inikot niya ang mga mata. F*ck. Kung umarte siya ay parang ngayon lang siya nakakita ng tall, dark and f*ckable—este, handsome pala. Darn, the man was giving the term hot guy a literal meaning.

Magalang na hinila ng kanyang fiancé ang silya para sa kanya at maingat siyang umupo. Medyo masikip sa bandang balakang at hita ang gown niya, at natatakot siyang baka mapunit iyon kapag magaslaw siya. Umupo

si Nikolai sa kanyang tabi at pinilit niyang huminga nang tama.

“Nikolai and Loretta are getting married by June next year,” bungad ni Paloma bago pa mai-serve ang appetizer.

Bumaling ang sampung pares ng mga mata sa table sa kanila ni Nikolai, at sabay-sabay sumabog ang mga tanong.

“Really?”

“Man, why didn’t you tell us?”

“When did you two start dating?”

“Ano’ng motif ng wedding n’yo?”

“You shouldn’t invite Stacey De la Vega, she’s a real attention whore.”

Kumuyom-palad si Loretta at naramdaman niya ang pag-apaw ng panic sa kanyang sikmura. Sh*t. She knew she should have practiced their *engagement story* two thousand more times last night.

“It was a whirlwind romance.” Nikolai’s strong baritone cut through the haze of her panic. Sinakop ng isang kamay nito ang palad niya sa ilalim ng mesa at marahang pinisil.

“Our families go way back, and we’ve known each other since we were kids. But we only got closer this last month and we hit it off.”

Gusto niyang mag-fist pump at sumigaw ng ‘Yeah! Go, Nikolai!’ God, mabuti na lang at magaling magsalita ang binata. Kung si Loretta lang, baka nabulol na siya sa paggawa ng kuwento. She was never good at lying, or making stories for that matter. Lagi siyang nahuhuli ng kanyang mama noon kapag nagsisinungaling siya tungkol sa pag-ubos niya ng fertilizor nito. Hindi nakatulong na pinasabog ni Loretta ang garahe nila gamit ang nasabing

fertilizer at puno ng bahid ng lupa at manure ang damit at kamay niya dahil doon.

“Wow, I never thought you had it in you, man!”

kantiyaw ni Greg, isa sa mga kaibigan at business partner ni Nikolai. “Congratulations!”

Nagpatuloy ang pag-ulan ng ‘congratulations’ at ‘best wishes’ habang nagse-serve ng appetizer.

“Thanks for the save,” usal niya sa binata nang sa wakas ay mawala ang majority ng atensyon sa kanila ni Nikolai. “I’m no good at these kinds of gatherings, I’ll end up embarrassing us both if I start talking.”

Marahan nitong pinisil ang kanyang kamay, at minasahe ang palad niya gamit ang hinlalaki nito. The pad of his thumb felt rough against her skin, and she felt licks of heat crawling across her palm from where his fingers were touching her.

Oh, man, this guy was doing weird things to her.

“So Loretta,” nakangiting tawag ni Francesca, isa sa mga kapatid ni Paloma. “It’s nice seeing you here tonight. We’ve always invited you to family events and parties, but you never show up.”

Napangiwi siya at sumimsim ng kanyang mango juice. “Yes, I’m sorry, I’ve just been busy with work.”

“You make us look like lazy asses, girl,” nakangiting kantiyaw ni Greg. “You’re still with *Hermes Lab*?”

Tumango siya at tinusok ang olive sa kanyang plato gamit ang kanyang tinidor. “Yes, my team and I we’re working on using spores to siphon oil spills.”

“Wow, that sounds great. Have you always wanted to be a chemist?”

Okay, she could do this. As long as it wasn’t about her engagement, she could handle the small talk. “In a way, I

guess. I've always wanted to blow things up since I was a kid."

Tumawa ang mga kasama nila sa mesa at kumunot-noo si Loretta. She was serious.

Umakyat ang kamay ni Nikolai sa kanyang braso at marahang hinaplos iyon. Tingles of heat raced up her spine at the feel of his fingertips running up and down her bare arm. Distracted siyang napatingin sa lalaki at nakitang may maliit na ngiti rin sa mga labi nito. Gumapang ang init sa kanyang tiyan sa drop dead gorgeous smile ng binata. Kung hindi nito gustong maging underwear model, sigurado siyang yayaman din ito bilang toothpaste model.

"Well, bakit hindi ka sa pharmaceutical company pumasok kung iyon ang gusto mo?" narinig niyang tanong ni Lily, ang nobya ni Greg kung hindi siya nagkakamali. "You should have worked for companies like... I don't know, sa military, I guess?"

"Armament manufacturers," pagtatama niya habang nakatitig sa babae. "Iyon ang una kong choice noon, but when my grandma got sick when I was a ten, I decided I wanted to make medicines to help save lives than blow things up and destroy them."

Napa-"ooh" ang mga kasama at malawak na ngumiti sa kanya. Ngumiti rin siya sa sarili. Okay, that was good, right?

"Well, that's really awesome, Loretta." Matamis na ngumiti si Paloma at inilapat ang mga kamay sa dibdib na para bang na-touch ito. "You make us feel bad for having less than awe-inspiring careers."

She waved her hand emphatically. "No, of course not. There's nothing wrong with designing dresses

and organizing parties, we all have our strengths and weaknesses. There's nothing wrong if you're not good at mixing chemicals and if you prefer mixing colors and dresses.”

Tumawa ang mga kasama nila sa table at tinapunan ng nakakalokong tingin si Paloma. Tumigas ang ngiti ng huli at parang gusto na siya nitong tusukin ng table knife.

Kumuyom-palad si Loretta at itinago iyon sa ilalim ng mesa. Shit. Gusto niyang umungol at magtago sa ilalim ng kanyang mamahaling plato. She said something rude, didn't she?

